A SINGLE TAPER

AND

THE INWARD EYE

BOY 1913

R. C. SCRIVEN

WITH FOREWORD BY

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

R. C. SCRIVEN
was born in Sheffield in 1907 of a very old Yorkshire engineering family. After going through the engineering shops he turned to journalism and served another stern apprenticeship to the writing of light verse.

A regular contributor to *Punch*, he has also been art critic, reviewer, and contributor to *The Observer, The Tablet, The Yorkshire Post* and *The Yorkshire Observer.*

Coming to the fore as a radio script-writer with *The Single Taper* and *The Inward Eye: Boy 1913* he has also had broadcast *The Island of White Birds, Leeds-One Man's City,* and *The Peacock City of P'Tzan King.*

R. C. Scriven has himself undergone the difficult and delicate eye operation described in *The Single Taper.*

THE PARTRIDGE PRESS

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by

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In Gratitude
to G. W. BLACK, whose hands
have shielded from extinction
the light that still burns
in so many tapers

To my good old friend George G. Hopkinson
In Yorkshire's moors & dales & skies
her brawling moorland becks & streams
her ploughlands and green pastures
more than his own enchanted eyes
dyes
colouring the pattern of his dreams.

R C Sherriff

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Introduction

THESE two verse plays, written and produced for sound radio, are fine examples of the release from limitations of time and space, the extension of scope, which this medium can offer to a writer who understands its powers and knows how to make use of them.

When it was first broadcast, in 1948, *A Single Taper* received widespread attention as a striking *tour-de-force*, portraying as it does with agonising immediacy the sensations of an artist patient undergoing the operation of eye-trephine under a merely local anæsthetic. But the play has a more lasting interest than mere novelty of subject. The artist's terrible awareness of the light and the dark is expressed with an intensity, a haunting cadence, a sudden originality of epithet and metaphor, which achieve true poetry.

The second play, *The Inward Eye : Boy* 1913, is a charming nostalgic picture of a day in a boy's life before the wars, one of those sunny summer childhood days which shine down our later troubled years as golden interludes of felicity. Readers who delight in Ronald Scriven's verses in *Punch* (and look eagerly each week to see if he figures there) will recognise again in this play his power of painting in words not only a landscape in all its bright, delicately coloured detail, but also the feeling which the landscape evokes ; not only the map of 'road, river, field-path, village spire' but also :

> 'every truth
> the detailed six-inch Ordnance cannot state.'

It is this feeling implicit in his closely observed landscapes, this rendering of the impression made by an outward scene upon a very sensitive inward eye, which gives Ronald Scriven's verse its tension and poignancy and makes it echo in the memory.

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

Halifax, 1952

This play was Broadcast by the B.C. on the North of England Home Service on the 31st March, 1948 and was repeated on the Third Programme on the 8th April 1948.

CAST

The Patient.....MICHAEL HORDERN
The Surgeon .....CARLETON HOBBS
The Nurse .....MARGARET WEBSTER
The Medical Student.....DAVID ENDERS

The production was by REX TUCKER

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A SINGLE TAPER

This play is about an eye operation. It is an attempt to convey, in dramatic form and in verse, an experience which is usually considered supremely difficult to communicate — acute physical sensation; sensation which is also, and necessarily, an emotional experience. The author of the play, has himself undergone the difficult and delicate eye operation described.

PATIENT : Nurse . . . !
Nurse, please !
I cannot sleep.

NURSE : Lie still.
You must lie still.
Lift up your head,
and let me smooth your pillows.
Now, lie still,
and try to sleep.

PATIENT : I cannot sleep,
I cannot rest ;
I am
unable to sleep,
tormented by my dreams,
and thinking of the morning . . .
Why can't I have
a general, not a local anæsthetic ?

NURSE : That is the surgeon's business ;
I have told you
it's usual in an eye-operation.
Now
just try to sleep,
but, if you can't, be patient ;
lie still, and rest your eyes :
it is deep night.

PATIENT : Black,
chaotic, — yet night
may be lit by stars,
worlds,
suns,
eyes bright as Blake's tyger
all diverse :
but single is light,
one, whether burning in candles before the high
altar
in mildness,
or blazing and shaking, hard, harsh and metallic,
intolerable, bright,
as it bursts from the thermite-bomb,
burns, like all flame,
to God's glory :
one ; infinite ;
light.
Light, which a stroke of the knife brings to
birth from the womb of the darkness :
Light : Chrism of love :
sight.

NURSE : You *must* lie still,
keep quiet.
Give me your wrist.
There now. You see ? Your pulse is much too
fast, and you must shut your eyes even
against this dim light :
it is not good for them :
you know that well :
rest them in darkness.

PATIENT : But . . . darknesses in darkness breed.
That wherein one cannot see
may fill a room,
a grave,
recede
horribly to eternity —

yet . . . perhaps more dreadfully . . .
in the dark, your eyes still see.
See, even in dreams . . .
see, . . .
what did Hamlet say ?

'And in that sleep of Death, what dreams may
come . . . '
What dreams ?
I did not fear the darkness, once.

NURSE : You must not fear it now.

PATIENT : Your hand is cool.
In sleeping, or in waking
I remember
a time and place when darkness brought delight.

Night came in peace —
O, tranquil ! —
and stooped to brush my eyelids
with her remote, cool fingers
than your hands quieter . . .
than . . your . . hands . . . . . quieter . . . . .

NURSE : Poor sufferer, sleep
until the morning.

When will morning come ?
How slowly, slowly, slowly drags the night.
And yet how swiftly,
once the windows pale,
the morning comes, the morning comes at last,
and day's clear light.

PATIENT : Intolerable light,
which hurts enfeebled sight !
Walls, ceilings, trolleys, floors,
the inverted world,
the maze of corridors,
clean, epicene,
white, white, white, white . . .

NURSE : Lie on your trolley. Wait.
Lie on your back.

PATIENT : And rein my nerves as best I can ?
And rein my nerves as best I may ?
Here Fate
tightens the rack.
And Fate is covered, clad, like ceilings, walls,
from head to foot in mask and overalls
white, like that tray of knives,
that light which falls
white with a whiteness dazzling to dimmed eyes.

NURSE : Now, steady. This will not hurt.

PATIENT : Whose finger pries
my eyelid back ?
A finger cool, firm, dry,
impersonal,
exposing my lashless eye
which quivers in apprehension

Something bright
glitters . . .
my eyeball winces . . .

NURSE : Now. Hold tight.
This will not hurt you. It is not the knife,
but drops :
cocaine.

PATIENT : They fall cool, soft,
clean, colourless as rain.
They fall —
oh, soothingly !
again ;
again.

NURSE : I said they would not hurt.

PATIENT : They dull the pain,
The gnawing ache of the nerve
This is some trick !
The knife will hurt ;
the knife will bite to the quick
of nerve and mind.
Yes, yes ! You know it will !
Is this the theatre ?
Where's the surgeon ?

NURSE : Be still.
The drops take time to act.
The surgeon must
prepare himself, as you must be prepared.
The theatre is just beyond those doors,
and he is in the dressing room, beyond
the theatre, being made ready . . .

SURGEON : Now this next case should be instructive,
John :
an eye trephine.
Have you yet seen one done ?
— ah, thanks —
but do not tie the mask on, please,
just for a moment . . .
Trephines can be quite tricky.

STUDENT : Yes, sir. I'm looking forward to this job.
I have not seen an eye-trephine performed
before.

SURGEON : H'm. You will see
plenty before your fourth year's over.

STUDENT : No doubt.
I know the patient. He's a painter.
It seems hard luck. I don't know if you care
for pictures ? This man's good.
It is worth while —
one of the things, I mean, which make your work
seem . . . useful.
I'm case-hardened to them, now,
the people who crowd the clinic,
day after day,
the stupid, milling, pushing, greedy mob
servile, because they're frightened —
human junk :
I wouldn't patch them, were it left to me :
Sir, you agree ?

SURGEON : I am not God. I must not judge.
Look, John,
my skill, such as it is, was given by Him.
But I have striven,
must strive to arm it with
knowledge to guide and guard it.
I have disciplined
hand, eye, and brain to be co-ordinate
and, for the sake of that same discipline,
have put aside delight in music, books,
and flowers.
When these two hands are past their work
I have ' green fingers ' —
they will get their chance.

But meanwhile I must discipline
that which is human in me
lest it might
disturb my concentration with the knife.
Put on my mask, please.

Thank you. Are we ready ?
The patient will be waiting . . .

PATIENT : My frantic heart within its cage is sick
with panic :
my belly comes up into my throat
as they wheel me into the theatre,
this shadowy cube of white enamel,
steel,
and chromium.

Numbed by the kind cocaine
my eyeball aches and wearies of the white
minute, three-quarter halo of hot gold wire
naked in the electric bulb —
bale-fire
paled by the cocaine-film's colourless drugged
rain.

It is not fair,
Oh, God, it is not fair
that I, for whom shape, colour and form
mean life
should have my eye cut into by a knife
and have to watch it happen.

My body strains
like a fear-mad animal
against its rider, my will ;
my body separate from me,
sending its subtle, separate terrors unmistakably
through me :
and I cannot quieten, cannot soothe its terrors,
calm it —
but bolt I shan't
for pride's an iron bit
and it shall answer to that bit's : hold still !

Who's that inverted behind my head ?
in white ?

SURGEON : Turn back his eyelid, nurse.
That seems all right.
You see, John ?
The cocaine has numbed the surface
of the cornea.
Three more drops, please, nurse.

Watch.
The whole surface dulls,
though slightly,
and the pupil dilates . . .

Feel comfortable ?

PATIENT : More brightly
intenser glows
the naked wire in its translucent peardrop
above my head . . .

My mouth's gone dry.
I cannot bear this aching blaze of light :
with one black penny of darkness
close the dying eye.

SURGEON : Nurse :
hand me the undine.

Don't worry.
I'm going to wash your eye clear now.
That will not hurt you in the least,
understand ?
It's just a water-spray.

PATIENT : Cool, cool, cool, oh, clean,
oh, purity, oh, comforting, marvellous rain
softer, more gentle even than cocaine . . .

You water nymphs,
no crystal spring,
not the Pierian divine
flowed ever half so crystalline,
so limpidly,
so diamond-bright.
It flows, it laves my very sight —
Why, thus the drowning Hylas might
have seen this new, pure element
felt fear contending with delight
(the water-nymphs surrounding him
a nymph to every struggling limb)
and known, as round and down they swirled—
a rippling, winking fountain-world
whose strangeness its enchantment lent—
the world in which the fishes swim.

PATIENT : Now let me close my eyes on that cool world.

O, flowering darkness !
Coral-red,
exquisite, delicate, convolute,
a naked, microscopic tree
imprinted, imprisoned,
branch and root
in the eye's rock-pool floats —
each thread
fine,
money-spider-spun,
minute.

The sight-nerve's sea-anemone
prepared, fixed in the eye's own slide
and three-dimensional, magnified
it is —
or has its image been
projected up from the sea-bed
of the deep brain ?

To main-deep green
it changes, aching-clear,
and now
behind, below, above, between
some obscure sense-reaction frees
swift patterns of wave-impulses
reacted, wave to wave, in forms
too subtle for analysis.

Could I but capture, remember, paint
such loveliness . . .
My mind feels faint
with horror when I think that I
am for the dark, like Anthony
and Egypt. In worse case than they.
I shall go blind . . .

Blind . . .

SURGEON : Let me see the eye.

Now, John, the hypodermic, please.
I am going to give
the ganglion an injection of cocaine . . .

You'll feel just a prick from the needle :
you understand that ?
The knife itself won't hurt you.

John : watch closely.

PATIENT : What's this that glitters ?

A'hh !

What in you sees,
Something — someone — not you. *It* is not you,
but It runs to the window of the eye,
the drugged eye,
needle-pierced,
It is something — someone, terribly alive,
terribly anxious,
and single-minded as a killer.
And It runs, runs to the left eye.

Runs, runs, and presses Itself with enormous
concentration
presses Itself, from the inside,
against the drugged eye's window
and looks out.

The eye out of which It looks grows larger,
becomes the size of a bull's-eye burning glass
a cloudy burning glass,
as the cocaine strikes . . .
A'hh !
That was like feeling a lightning-stroke
You cannot see.

SURGEON : The ganglion is freezing,
so that the eye still sees, but cannot feel.

STUDENT : I say, nurse,
do they usually react like that
in an eye operation ?

NURSE : No. It is
a matter of temperament.
It would be easy
for the patient, if a general anaesthetic
could be administered —
he asked for one —
but, in an eye-trephine,
the eye must be moved by the patient
as the surgeon
directs.
It is a most delicate operation.
You're lucky to watch one.

STUDENT : The patient doesn't think so.

PATIENT : The something-that-sees is now more terrified.
It can't see clearly.
It is frenzy-mad to *see*
but what It does see It cannot quite grasp
as a man with a perplexed, neurotic mind
can't easily handle
even a cup and saucer, but they will clink.
It cannot see
whether the hand of the surgeon is upside down
above It, because the surgeon's image is inverted
by some trick of the cocaine
or whether, in fact, he is standing behind Its
head.

I try to work out, intellectually,
the right solution. Surely, I tell myself
it must be the surgeon bending above my head
because . . .
I give it up. It's too complex.

And who *is* this ?
this something-that-sees, but is not me,
yet peers out desperately from inside my head ?

Ah !
Suddenly It can see something,
very clearly.

SURGEON : Observe, John,
you can tell
by slight palpation, if the anaesthesia is complete
or not.

PATIENT : It's a fingernail the size of a one-inch chisel,
and gloved . . .

SURGEON : Feel anything ?

PATIENT : No. But my imagination can,
and is terrified at itself,
like a man suddenly confronting his image in a
mirror
in a haunted house, at midnight.
I'm frightened just because I can feel nothing.
But shall I feel nothing when the knife moves in
my eye ?

SURGEON : Hand me the trephine, nurse.

PATIENT : The mind's window,
the eye's window
is clouded, frozen
like a seven-tenths English sky in late November.
But, as I lie
this eye through which I look,
through which my mind peers
this eye, through which must pass
the thin knife —
this huge, swollen burning glass
is clouded, as with whirls of fiery gas
spinning, in a world in the shaping,
in a star light-years away.

SURGEON : Look downwards.
You must obey
my instructions absolutely now.
Look fixedly downwards ;
keep your gaze steady.

PATIENT : Into my sleeping eye
night-clouded now
the trephine sinks.
I feel its thin blade move
within my eyeball :
I feel the blade move . . .

And it hurts no more
than a finger is hurt,
dipped in just-tepid water.
It is as though
the water, not your finger, were sensitive.

But, because I know
it is a knife in my eyeball
the agony in my mind is far more searing
than any physical agony I have known . . .

SURGEON : Keep still.
You must hold your gaze steady.
Listen to me.
My will meets, and recognises and upholds
your will.
It does not try to master, but holds and upholds
in a world of the mind,
of the naked spirit only
your naked will.
Have courage. Keep still.

NURSE : Watch, John,
He is twisting the trephine between his fingers.
Watch closely.

STUDENT : It is most delicate and beautiful.
to see.

PATIENT : The blade twists.
The blade cuts.

Oh, quick as the shutter of a camera flicks
I see !

Oh, clearly as through the eyes of childhood
I see !
Through the eye-shaped window in the mist
I see !
With marvellous precision, I see . . .

Oh, God ! The eye-shaped window has clicked
shut
once more.
There is nothing but this thick burning glass.

But I have seen.

I have seen ;
and, rigid in the breathing darkness
whether night or morning in the world of light
where I must lie until they take the bandage
from my eyes, and I shall know my eyesight's
fate,
I will lie patient.
Lost, my fear of darkness,
aye; of darkness ultimate
for my spirit has answered another's
over a knife's blade :
'I trust your courage and wisdom
though I am sore afraid.'

SURGEON : It is finished.
You may remove him.

STUDENT : Has his sight been saved ?

SURGEON : I do not know.
I can answer better, when
we test his eye's reaction to the light.

PATIENT : How soon ? How soon ?

SURGEON : In a week's time.
You must lie still ; be patient :
the darkness you have feared has powers of
healing,
will strengthen your eyes —
if I have been successful —
to bear the light.

PATIENT : O, light which trembles
in the sphere
of one leaf-dragging drop of dew ;
as in the cocaine's falling tear ;

light, ancient as Time,
and new as morning ;

day's light, which defines
the infinite number of seen lines,
all shape,
all form,
each blade of grass,
all detail, colour, plane and mass ;

light, soft as peachbloom,
hard as brass,
bright commonplace of common day !

Darkness may close upon my sight —
dare I then ask for inner light ?

Yes, Lord, dear Lord :
because I loved
the blaze of noon,
as Milton did,
and dawn's first, paler-than-primrose glow :
if light, seen light
I must forego —
that outward, visible sign,
which we
accept from You unthinkingly
so often —
light, denied to me.

Lord, grant me, —
if this thing must be —
contentment, to keep bitterness
at bay ;

Dear Lord, let me guess —
when the sun's glowing furnace-bars
as the still candles of Your stars
I have forgotten —
let me guess
a single taper in the night.

THE INWARD EYE
BOY 1913

This play was Broadcast by the B.B.C. on the Third Programme on November 7th, 1948 and was repeated on the Third Programme on the 10th November 1948.

CAST

Robert ..... MICHAEL HORDERN
Boy ..... MARCELLA SPENCER
Tom and Guest ..... CLIFFORD BUCKTON
Jack ..... CHARLES LEFEAUX
Margaret ..... SUSAN RICHARDS
Wilfred ..... KEITH LLOYD

Produced by ROBERT GITTINGS

THE INWARD EYE

BOY 1913

ROBERT : Strange that the inward eye can re-create
Sight,
sound,
scent, touch, taste,
colour and motion and light
out of the past with such fidelity.

And yet the mind knows well
that thinnest smoke has more reality,
and a seen shadow is more tangible
than the lost summers of boyhood.

Yet . . . I can smell
dusty, and fresh, and pungent . . .
something far
back in my memory . . .

Tar ! I have it, tar !
Brighter than black quicksilver,
dulled so soon.

How I remember now that afternoon
of nineteen-thirteen. Yes, the golden year.
And I can hear
the voice of the boy I was, oh, limpid-clear.

BOY : Look, father, look at the tar !
The sun has melted the tar in the cobblestones.

ROBERT : Cobblestones ?
Horses !
I skipped at my father's side
From square to square of the pavement,
jiggety-jig,
tar on my freshly-laundered sailor-blouse . . .

BOY : Will Tom be waiting for us with the gig
At Milford ? Will he, father ? I *can't* believe
we're really going to Milford. I love it more
than any place in England . . . Europe . . .the
world,
The universe . . . !

ROBERT : Yes, I love Milford,
which does not exist,
and is more real than water,
air or fire.

It has two boundaries :
to the south lies birth,
to the north, death.

Its one-mile square of earth
I mapped —
road, river, field-path, village spire —
uncontoured,
to no scale,
inaccurate
as a boy draws —
but holding every truth
the detailed six-inch Ordnance cannot state ;
truths I recall, as Adam called to mind
the beasts which he had named in innocence,
when his world was new, exciting, and immense.

BOY : Will Snowball be harnessed
or Judy, do you think ?
May I ride with Tom to the stables
when we get there ?
Oh, father, do say I may hold, just hold, *one* rein.

ROBERT : My memory's ears
echo his leisurely, Olympian laugh
drowned deep in the hurrying years . . .

Time did not hurry, in nineteen-thirteen
not even in that thronged West Riding town
where rows and rows and rows and monotonous
rows
of back-to-back houses huddled close about
machine-shops, factories, mills and printing
works

from which, in the late dusk, the workers swarmed
each to the door of the world,
the door
which shuts life out, which shuts life in.

Each house
with Nottingham curtains artfully arranged
to keep out air and light,
feared like a knife
lest unkind eyes, strangers' eyes
peering, prying might surmise
the bargains you had struck with life.

And there were, too
the stone-girt houses of the well-to-do
the solid, suburban villas, Victorian-built
to hint at bargains life had struck with you —
the Wilton carpets which the sun must not wilt ;
chintz, and bronze horses, clocks in ormolu ;
medallioned wallpapers, little what-nots (spilt with bric-à-brac) ;
and late Edwardian gilt
gay on an ebb-tide of mahogany
to prove that times had changed,
and the reign was new.

BOY : Hurry, oh, Father, hurry, *do*
we'll miss the train !

ROBERT : Yes, even the trains, in that far-off Year of Grace
all ran to Bradshaw's smooth, well-ordered pace.
There were no queues in the cool, dim booking-hall,
where the ticket-clerk, with his calm, pale, bearded face
had the air of a well-trained flunkey at a ball.

And then, beside, in faraway 'thirteen
each automatic chocolate-machine
was stacked with milk-bars,
silver-tissue-wrapped,
quick-melting, biscuit-thin
sub-flavoured oddly with tar when you licked your fingers
(how hauntingly on the tongue that taste still lingers !)

BOY : Father, I'm going to save a bar of choc.
for Judy.
Did you hear the signal-arm go down ?
It went ' KLOK ! '
like that. Hush ! Listen !
It's coming ! It's coming !

ROBERT : Do boys still feel that quick leap of the heart
as a train draws in ?

BOY : We've got a corner-seat to ourselves.
Hoo-ray !
Six stops to Milford,
the guard is waving his flag ;
we're going, we're going . . .

BOY : We're off !
Oh, isn't this *ripping!*

ROBERT : Now not the city
but Time itself is slipping
with gathering, clicking speed away, behind.
Time telescopes
as houses, tenements, streets
telescope, blur, distort —
then through the blind
eyepiece of the last tunnel, Time re-focuses
an ampler world, whose green horizon-trees
wheel round, as though to guard its villages
ripe-roofed,
and nestled down like strawberries
by roads and hedges.
And, clearer now revealed
field by remembered field . . .

BOY : Milford !
Father, there's Tom, look, look, there's Tom,
and Judy in the shafts.
Tom ! To-o-om !
Good-bye, train !
Oh, Tom, I knew it would be good old Judy,
I knew.
I've saved a piece of choc. for her.
Golly, it's melted !

TOM : Good-morning, Mr. Jack.
It's nice to see you here again.

JACK : 'Morning, Tom.
By Jove, this Milford air is fresh and sweet !

TOM : All right, sir ? Right you are.
Now, Master Robert,
up with you !
That's the ticket !
C'k, c'k ! C'mon, old girl !

ROBERT : The reins looped over the satin-glossy flanks
gleamed not less warmly ;
The harness jingled like
my father's pocketful of golden soverigns.
The spider-wheels spun down the white turn-
pike :
the Gods were not more bravely charioted
than a small boy in a spick-span high-sprung gig.

BOY : I can see right over the hedges.
Tom, there's old Stainburn's pig.
Do let me hold one rein ! Judy ! Come up !
I say ! They've started mowing. I can smell
the hay.
Why, all the hedges
are thick with dust already, and it's only June.

TOM : That's those confounded stinking motor-cars,
Master Robert,
they do say Doctor is thinking o' buying one.
They'll never beat hosses ; and so I told him
straight.

BOY : I'd love to ride in a motor-car,
I think they're ripping.

TOM : Give me the reins, Master Robert,
you'll frighten the mare.
Ah, whoa, there, Judy ; whoa.
All right, Mr. Jack . . . look out for the step, sir.
Whoa, Judy, girl. Now, Master Robert . . .

BOY : I'm going to the stables with you, Tom.
You said I could
didn't you, father ?

JACK : Well, behave yourself, Robert,
and mind you aren't late for lunch.
or else . . .
my word and ninepence !

BOY : All right, all right !
Good-bye . . .
O Tom, please, please
do let me drive a little way to the stables.

ROBERT : After the close, rustling, horse-permeated gloom
of the loose-box ;
after feeding apples
to a velvety muzzle,
more enchanting still
the hierophant's sanctum in the harness-room !

Each on its peg hung saddle, bridle, bit,
and gamecock-rowelled spur,
with all the gleam and glow and glitter
that spit
and polish could give.

but with a livelier
delight the eye would pass
to the full-rigged ship in its magic vacuum
its cork-sealed bottle and dimple-necked green
glass.

BOY : But how did the ship get into the bottle, Tom ?

TOM : Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies.

BOY : Wilfred says its done with string,
and a match-stick.

TOM : Tell Master Wilfred from me to try the trick.

BOY : Wilfred'll know all right. Wilfred knows
everything.
Bet he knows more than you about horses, too.

TOM : Oh, aye ?

BOY : If you've got a horse that's a roarer,
Wilfred says
you cure it with some stuff called bitter aloes.
But they don't cure it, not really. They only
stop it roaring until you've sold it.

TOM : No good 'ull come to that Wilfred.

BOY : Oh, yes it will. He's going to be a millionaire.
He told me so.
Oh, I do love the smells in here.
How many can you smell, Tom ?

TOM : Smell ? There's no smell in here.

BOY : There's saddle-soap,
and hay . . .
manure, and liquid boot-polish . . .
musk . . . *that's* from the orchard . . .
there's that *lovely* liniment . . .
and mown grass ; I expect that's from the tennis
court.
And . . . yes . . . paraffin . . .
and straw, and stuff in the bins :
all mixed up in a sort of a horsey smell.
Glorious !

Luncheon !

TOM : You'd best be off, then, sharp,
or your Aunt Margaret 'ull have summat to say
to you.

MARGARET : Robert ! Change those boots at once,
they reek of the stables.

BOY : But I have changed them, honestly.
Aunt Margaret, what's for lunch, please ?

MARGARET : Duck and green peas, Robert dear . . .
but it is not manners
to ask.

BOY : No, Aunt Margaret.
And, please, is there apple pie ?
And cream ?

ROBERT : Yes, there was apple-pie,
with cream galore.
But lunch, in those leisurely, ample, well-bred days
to a small boy was a torment and a bore
long ere the grown-ups had finished,
and he might leave
the table at which small boys were seen, not heard.
Boredom . . .
with gibberish flowing above one's head,
and, now and then, some fitful phrase or word
caught, prisoned in the mind's capricious, fanciful ears
to be recalled, set free from long-forgotten years . . .

JACK : Golla bee zon keet, ulla *Galloper Smith ?*

GUEST : Diz a naw, *Asquith* shap eril teeg *Home Rule.*

MARGARET : *Asquith ?* Darl zin geee *Suffragettes !*
Suffragettes.
No lady could behave like Mrs. Pankhurst.

BOY : Mrs. Pankhurst . . . pancake . . . panconk . . . pankink.
What is a suffragette, Aunt Margaret, please ?

MARGARET : No, dear, not yet.
Waarl, nuzz hee comzon, *drowned when the Titanic went down.*

JACK : Werz dup shoo-er ; *bodies floating in the sea. Her maiden trip, too.*

BOY : Please may I leave the table, Aunt Margaret, *please.*

MARGARET : Yes, Robert ?
Very well, dear ; you may leave the table now.

BOY : Good egg !
Hooray, I can go to Wilfred's now.
Wilfred, Wilfred, it's me !

WILFRED : Robert ! Sh !
They'll hear you.
Follow me to the stairs. Don't make a sound.
They'll hear you, like that . . .
crawl on all fours, like me.
Buck up past the drawing-room door —
there's *company*.

BOY : Where are we going ? To the attic ?

WILFRED : To the *stockade* you ass.

BOY : I'm here, I'm here.

WILFRED : Sh ! Don't you know
there's lions n' tigers, real lions and tigers in there.
That's why we keep the door locked.
If you listen
you can hear the lions growling . . .
Listen hard. Hold your breath.

BOY : How . . . how near are they ?

WILFRED : Just . . . on . . . the . . . other . . . side . . . of . . . the . . . door.
I'm going to unbolt the door.

BOY : No, Wilfred, no !

WILFRED : They're after us !
Slide down the bannisters, Robert !
It's quicker !
Near shave, that, Robert.
I got you out of it.
Mind *they* don't hear you — *they're* in the drawing-room still !

ROBERT : As unpredictable as the inward eye
is the inward ear !

Alexander's Rag Time Band
loud, restless, brassy vulgar tune, is dear

to me . . . a key by which I understand
how to unlock my father's world.
and find
my mother's living image close at hand,
in a hat with a plume of ostrich feathers curled
around the brim
and at her neck a foam
of lacy frills
as, with tight-wristed sleeves
her hands among the tea-cups gently moved
and she was, as we are not now, 'At Home.'

WILFRED : I'm not having tea with *them*

BOY : Wilfred, have tea with *me*
There's strawberries and cream. Come on. On
the tennis lawn.

ROBERT : That obstinately-daisied tennis lawn,
marked, more by whitewash than by crazy
netting
from the big field
with its thick-splashed buttercup-golds —
how real the magic circle of memory holds
beyond forgetting
the summerhouse with its blistered paint,
and quaint
clear panes of coloured glass.
Its door once was
that of a mid-Victorian drawing-room.
Glass richer in my memory than York's
emblazoning the minster's centuried gloom.

WILFRED : Shut the door, Robert.
You look through the red one,
and I'll look through the blue.

BOY : Isn't it funny ?
Everything's the same colour,
and yet, sort of, not the same colour.
Old Snowball has turned pink,
but Judy's very dark red.

WILFRED : The sky's all blue,
and the grass is purple blue,
and everything in the whole world is blue.
Move up !

BOY : I like the yellow one best.
Yes, the grass and the hedge and the people
seem all in . . . oh, I don't know. Double
sunshine.

WILFRED : Pooh ! It's only coloured glass.
Let's look through the little window at the back
where you can see through properly.

BOY : I like the yellow one best.

WILFRED : Oh !

BOY : What can you see ?

ROBERT : What did he see with the strange gaze of youth
prophetic by flashed,
willing the future,
disdaining
grey hints of a pattern traced on the shining
cloth
for the shuttles of shells to weave ?

Did he perceive
darkly, the not-yet-broken battalion straining
to hold the ridge ?
See the terrible twinkle of guns
churning the twilight into a bloody froth ?

BOY : What is it, Wilfred ?

WILFRED : Oh, I dunno.
It's awfully stuffy in here.
Let's get out and go down to the river.

BOY : Yes, *let's*
The river will be just top-hole to-day !

ROBERT : That day, that day . . .
its texture was woven
of sunlight, air, and leaves,
and strands of water-ripples loomed on light —
a finer silk than the money-spider weaves
more airily spun than the recurring flight
of swallows sewing to the cottage eaves
life's gossamer fabric.

Yet the world's weight might
hang safely on one thread suspended there
from God's own finger in the aetherial air . . .

But they were heedless of texture and pattern, as
two pebbles side by side in the river-bed
were heedless of their own water-rounded
share —
as two leaves on a twig are unaware
of theirs in the forest that shawls a mountain's
flank.

Young Robert leaned from his canoe,
and sank
a jam-jar on its hairy length of string . . .

BOY : Hi !
Wilfred !
I can see the bubbles cling
all the way down through the water !
They wink just like
The eyes of the minnows.

WILFRED : I've caught three minnows. One of 'em's a whopper.

BOY : I've caught a newt.

WILFRED : Newts are no good. They eat one another up.
Bring your canoe beside mine Robert.
Quick !

BOY : But . . .

WILFRED : Be quick, I tell you.
There are savages.
This river is dangerous.

BOY : Savages ? Wilfred, where ?

WILFRED : Cannibal tribes. On the bank.
We may have to fight them.

BOY : We must stick together.

WILFRED : This is the Amazon.
We are hundreds of miles up the river.
There are no other white men for hundreds and
hundreds of miles.

BOY : Listen !

WILFRED : That is their signal.
They are going to attack us.
We must make for the other bank. We'll
ambush them.

BOY : Hooray ! Kill 'em all !

WILFRED : Hold your fire until we see the whites of their eyes.
And when I say fire . . .
FIRE !

BOY : Bang ! Bang ! Bang !

WILFRED : Bang ! Bang ! Bang ! Bang !
That got the cannibal chief !
Bang ! Bang !

BOY : Bang ! Bang !
Look out, a spear !

WILFRED : Charge 'em !
There ! That's the last of 'em.
I saved your life.

BOY : Oh, Wilfred, I saved your life, too.

WILFRED : So you did.
I tell you what, Robert
we must become blood brothers.
We must do it properly — cut one another's wrists with our knives.

BOY : Yes, yes, we must.
I've got a topping knife,
as sharp as Tom's. Tom can press the blade on the palm of his hand, and if he holds the knife steady
it leaves a dent, but doesn't cut.
But if he moves it the tiniest bit . . .
That's funny. It hasn't cut yet.

WILFRED : Saw with it, then . . .
like this . . .
Ouch !
There, that's drawn blood . . .
Go on, man,
saw . . . and don't be an ass and cut the artery.

BOY : Ouch !

WILFRED : Now rub your wrist on mine
to mix the blood.
There. Now we are blood brothers for ever
and ever.

BOY : For ever and a day.

ROBERT : That day has lived for more than thirty years.

And Wilfred, my blood-brother . . .
does he not still
live in that day,
feel the water's strangeness,
the tug
of the current around his cut wrist ;
does he not fill
his eager nostrils with the wet smell of things
peculiar to rivers ?

I feel the hot sun drug
my own blood now, as then —
so why not he ?
We are companions in
a circle of memory,
meniscus-sealed
by water, and fire of the sun's reflected light
which made the river pool, gleam burnished —
silver-bright.

WILFRED : Race me across the pool to that willow stump.
When I say jump . . .
JUMP.

BOY : I beat you, Wilfred, I beat you !

WILFRED : You . . . jumped . . . before I shouted.

BOY : I did not !

WILFRED : You did !

BOY : I didn't . . .
Well, don't let's quarrel, anyway.
We are blood brothers.

WILFRED : We are. Let's have a feast
to celebrate it.

ROBERT : Those feasts they make
mark the Red Indian heights of boyhood's days.

To mix a flour-and-water damper cake
and rake wood-ashes over it, and bake
the doughy mess, and then in rapture gaze
on its black-carbonised mass,
to break, and eat it
flour-lumps and all . . .
What gourmet's dish can beat it ?

BOY : Scrumptious !

WILFRED : Oh, scrumptious !

BOY : Mmmm ! Do you remember
Aunt Margaret's queen cakes, that day you came to tea ?

WILFRED : And we had to have our faces scrubbed raw ?

BOY : And say ' Yes, please ' and ' No, thank you ' and nothing else ?

WILFRED : Sickening.

BOY : Sickening. And I cut one queen cake in two . . .

WILFRED : And found just one rotten, miserable dried up currant.

BOY : And I nudged you, and you spluttered into your tea.

WILFRED : And when they asked us . . .

BOY : I spluttered into my tea . . .

WILFRED : All over the table-cloth . . . and we laughed . . .

BOY : And we laughed and . . . we . . . laughed !

ROBERT : Laughter is
one of the strongest of those concentric rings
which close the circle of a boy's world from
our adult world —
as the free-masonry
of silence shared with another boy against
grown-up stupidity encloses too.

And as their cloud-shadow-swift modulation of
mood and key
baffles us when they hit on something new
exciting for them to share.

WILFRED : H'st ! Look. Kingfisher.

BOY : No, Where ?

WILFRED : Under those willows. He's got a fish in his beak.

BOY : I see him now. The light is fading a bit.

WILFRED : Ought to have had my catapult. I could hit
a sparrow at that range . . .
Watch. Did you see him jerk
the fish round in his beak till he swallowed it ?
It wriggled just like a worm on a fish-hook will.

ROBERT : Cold blooded little devils,
boys !
But still
so keenly sensitive to beauty, too,
unconsciously; or why, as the years pass
does memory with such detailed love renew
that one day's image, that, if I close my eyes
I feel the twilight deepen over the stream
as a breath blurs a glass,
and on the river bank when dulls that gleam
I see the very snail-shells, striped humbugs in
the grass.

BOY : It's getting late.
The water-lilies have shut.
That means it's nearly the end of our special day.
They hate us to be out so late on our own.

WILFRED : *They* would. As though we can't look after
ourselves.

BOY : What's that ? Oh, someone playing a
gramophone
over the water.

WILFRED : Music IS soppy, isn't it ?
They wanted me to learn the violin.
Sickening.

BOY : Awfully sickening.
But music's not so bad
when you hear it over the water, like this.

Wilfred. Hasn't it been a marvellous day !
The record's run down. I say.
We ought to be getting back.

WILFRED : All right, Robert.
You shift
the stuff into the canoes, and then we'll drift
downstream, with our paddles across the
cockpits,
slowly . . .

ROBERT : Slowly
while the paddles dripped seed-pearls over the
river-glass
which drew the last light from the night-
nearing sky
we drifted tranquilly
and seemed to pass
through liquid shadow and solid light,
as through
a landscape painted by the loving brush
of Constable.

WILFRED : The last thrush. Bet you I'm up before that
chap to-morrow.
Let's see which of us gets to the stables first.

BOY : By Jove, yes ! And after that we'll make a ship.
like Tom's.

WILFRED : Only better. And I'll find a bottle, and we'll put the ship in the bottle,
And I'll raise the sails with a match-stick,
and some cotton.

BOY : To-morrow.

WILFRED : To-morrow.

BOY : I'm awfully glad we're blood brothers.
When I go to bed
I'll look out of my window,
and you look out of your window,
and we'll make a sign to each other . . .
like this :

WILFRED : Like this. It will mean :
'We saved each other's lives.'
All right, Robert.
An Indian sign. Before we go to sleep.
Look out, you ass ! You'll have me into the bank.

BOY : It's grown so dark. This IS the end of our day.

ROBERT : Of all the Protean rooms in the Palace of Sleep
are few in which a man may dream more deep
than with wide-open lids beneath the light.

Makers of dreams
a poet has called such men
who see with the third, inward eye . . .
but all men have
that faculty if they would use it.
if
they would but keep the boy in them alive
to boyhood's freshness of experience
yet let the mind grow up . . .

or is that but
a waking dream the end of which is night ?

When it was first broadcast, in 1948, *A Single Taper,* received widespread attention as a striking *tour-de-force*, portraying with agonising immediacy the sensations of an artist patient undergoing the operation of eye-trephine. The artist's terrible awareness of the light and dark is expressed with an intensity, a haunting cadence, a sudden originality of epithet and metaphore, which achieve true poetry.

The second play, *The Inward Eye: Boy 1913,* is a charming nostalgic picture of a day in a boy's life before the wars. Readers who delight in R. C. Scriven's verses in *Punch* will recognise again in this play his power of painting in words not only a landscape in all its bright, delicately coloured detail, but also the feeling which the landscape evokes.

Phyllis Bentley

Scriven's play *A Single Taper* made radio history by its superb use of the medium.

The Radio Times

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